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How to effectively use a self talk strategy: New research findings will surprise you. ©

Self-talk has been used by athletes for years for the purpose of controlling emotions and bringing focus back to task. Short phrases expressed in a positive present tense help to alleviate normal performance pressures. “I can do it,” or “I am in the zone” are typical self-talk statements that are commonly expressed to bring attention to the task at hand. They are short, straight to the point and easy to remember.

But, did you know that expressing a self-talk statement in second or third person you may actually improve its effectiveness? In a recent observation, psychologist Ethan Kross noticed that a self-talk expressed in a second or third person (you or he/she), instead of in first person (I), creates further cognitive clarity and an emotional distance from the person expressing such a statement. In other words, expressing a self-talk that does NOT start with “I”, but rather in a second or third person, helps to not only regain focus for the task at hand, but also pushes away the emotional response linked to expressing such a self talk.



Dr. Kross noticed that when LeBron James was explaining his frustration, he referred to it as “I wanted to do what was best for LeBron James, and to do what makes LeBron James happy.” Just listening to how he talked, it seemed as if he was talking to another person also named LeBron James. The way LeBron James expressed his frustration allowed for the creation of an emotional distance between his own upsetting words and its understandable emotional reaction. He was able to remain calmed and collected while talking about an upsetting experience. A self-talk used in a second or third person lessens the emotional connection of the words being expressed.

In an article written by Weintraub, she explains that the benefits of this style of self-talk are engrained in a communication pattern used during our early developmental stages. When toddlers play with their imaginary friends, it is quite common that they engage in a dual verbal interaction. Toddlers typically provide words to their imaginary friends for the sake of continuing the playing engagement. For example, little John is playing with his trains and says something like: “Now, we put that train there and then we can push it to the end, but do not start yet, ok?”

Unbeknown to the toddler, at a very early age, he/she is starting to develop a coping skill that soothes the playing experience and saves him/herself from the stress of playing by him/herself. The early brain, which is in its prime stage to develop long-term memory, stores these engaging and soothing experiences that may be

retrieved in adulthood. Beck, a child psychologist, believes that this early self-talks elicit neural connections in the emotional area of our brains, which lead to lifelong learning while enhancing soothing responses.



Even as adults, we can still express upsetting emotions in second or third person and not feel the concurrent distress. For example, a tennis player feels quite nervous as he is about to play an opponent who is ranked much higher than he is. His palms are sweating, he is short of breath, and his heart is pounding quite fast. At this moment, he would greatly benefit from using this style of self-talk to soothe his nerves. He may say something like: "John, you have trained very hard and put a lot of effort to make it this far; go out there and give it your best try. It does not matter if you win or lose; just enjoy this great playing opportunity."

This style of self-talk invites a combination of calmness and concentration. The self-talk is still zeroed in on bringing the best out of his game and is presented in an optimistic and empowering chat. However, its content projects an emotional distance, which allows for clarity in his thinking and more calmness of his emotions.

Whether you are on a golf course, a tennis court, a soccer field, a running track or just about to give an oral presentation before many unknown people, remember that feeling nervous is normal; secondly, use a self-talk style that is expressed as if you were talking to yourself. And, thirdly, envision yourself having fun and successfully accomplishing your task.

Enjoy your summer and every opportunity you get to play your favorite sport!!



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